



# Info Sheet

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Contact: Keith Christman (703) 741-5602  
Email: keith\_christman@americanchemistry.com

## RECYCLABLE PLASTIC BAGS

### **Plastic grocery bags are an extremely resource-efficient disposable bag choice.**

- Plastic grocery bags require 40-70 percent less energy to manufacture than paper bags.<sup>1</sup>
- For every seven trucks needed to deliver paper bags, only one truck is needed for the same number of plastic bags, helping to save energy and reduce emissions.
- It takes 91% less energy to recycle a pound of plastic than it takes to recycle a pound of paper.<sup>1</sup>

### **Less material means less waste and fewer emissions.**

- 2,000 plastic bags weigh 30 lbs; 2,000 paper bags weigh 280 lbs. Plastic bags take up a lot less space in a landfill.<sup>1</sup>
- Plastic bags generate 80 percent less waste than paper bags.<sup>1</sup>
- Plastic grocery bags make up a tiny fraction (less than 0.5 percent) of the U.S. municipal solid waste stream.<sup>2</sup>
- The manufacture and use of paper bags generates 70% more air emissions than plastic.<sup>1</sup>
- Plastic bags generate only 40% of the greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions of non-composted paper bags and only 21% of the GHG emissions of composted paper bags.<sup>3</sup>
- The production of plastic bags consumes less than 4 percent of the water needed to make paper bags.<sup>3</sup>

### **Plastic grocery bags are fully recyclable<sup>4</sup> and the number of recycling programs is increasing daily.**

- Nationwide over 812 million pounds of bags and film were recycled in 2006—up 24 percent from 2005.
- Plastic bags can be made into dozens of useful new products, such as building and construction products, low-maintenance fencing and decking, and of course, new bags.
- There is high demand for this material, and in most areas, demand exceeds the available supply because many consumers are not aware that collection programs are available at local stores.
- In recent years, many grocers and retailers have introduced plastic bag collection programs. Consumers should look for a collection bin, usually located at the front of the store. The number of municipal drop-off centers and curbside programs to recycle plastic bags is increasing also.

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<sup>1</sup> GUA - Gesellschaft für umfassende Analysen, The Contribution of Plastic Products to Resource Efficiency, Vienna, 2005, <http://www.plasticseurope.org/Content/Default.asp?PageID=517#>  
Boustead Consulting, "Life Cycle Assessment for Three Types of Grocery Bags - Recyclable Plastic; Compostable, Biodegradable Plastic; and Recycled, Recyclable Paper," 2007,

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. *Questions about Your Community Shopping Bags: Paper or Plastic*. See: [www.epa.gov/region1/communities/shopbags.html](http://www.epa.gov/region1/communities/shopbags.html). Downloaded from the Internet May 2007.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. *Municipal Waste in the United States: 2005 Facts and Figures*. See: <http://www.epa.gov/garbage/pubs/mswchar05.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Swiss Agency for Environment, Forests & Landscape (SAEFL). *Life Cycle Inventories for Packagings*. Environmental Series 250/1. 1998. Based on data from *Eco-Profiles of the European Plastics Industry, LDPE Film Extrusion: A Report by I. Boustead for PlasticsEurope*. March 2005. See <http://lca.plasticseurope.org/index.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Recycling may not be available in all areas. Check to see if recycling exists in your community. See: <http://www.plasticbagrecycling.org/01.0/>.



Consumers can locate plastic bag recycling programs in their communities by visiting [www.PlasticBagRecycling.org](http://www.PlasticBagRecycling.org).

- In addition to grocery bags, other plastic retail bags, dry cleaning bags and newspaper bags can be included wherever plastic bags are collected for recycling.

**In addition to recycling, a recent national survey shows that over 90% of Americans reuse their plastic bags.**

- About 65% of Americans reuse their bags for trash disposal. Other common uses include lunch bags and pet pick-up.
- In this regard, the reuse of a plastic shopping bag prevents a second bag from being purchased to fulfill these necessary functions.

## **WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT BAG BANS**

**Banning recyclable plastic bags will not reduce society's dependence on oil.**

- In the United States, nearly 80% of polyethylene, the type of plastic used to make plastic bags, is produced from natural gas. This includes feedstock, process and transportation energy.
- Much of the energy used to make plastic bags is embodied in the bag itself, and since plastic bags are fully recyclable, that energy is available for new products.

**Mandating that recyclable plastic bags be replaced with biodegradable or compostable bags will not reduce litter or the amount of waste in our landfills.**

- The biodegradable and compostable bags currently on the market will only degrade in a professionally-managed, large-scale composting facility. They will not breakdown in the natural environment, in a home composting device or in a landfill.
- It is currently estimated that there are fewer than 100 suitable composting facilities in the United States. Where composting facilities are not available, "compostable" bags will be sent to a landfill.

**Banning recyclable plastic bags or mandating their replacement with compostable bags will diminish efforts to recycle these products.**

- Mandating that grocers and retailers replace plastic bags with compostable or paper bags will eliminate many in-store collection programs, which are currently the largest mechanism for recovering post-consumer bags for recycling.
- In addition, the mandated use of compostable bags will cause the accidental commingling of biodegradable and recyclable bags, which will contaminate the recovered material, rendering it unusable by manufacturers.

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